



Today is one of the most important national holidays in America. On Veterans Day, we honor the profound contribution and sacrifice of the men, women and families for their service to our country.

2012 has proven to be a challenging year for our nations' military and veterans. Our commitments overseas continue to tax the armed forces, and the economy at home is still not fully recovered. Veterans have been hard hit with unemployment and financial uncertainty. As we are working our way out of the recession, there is also great pressure to reduce spending and the deficit.

I am fighting hard to make sure that as we work to realign the Defense budget to reflect the realities of 21st century conflict, we target unnecessary programs and not the benefits for the troops, veterans and their families.

I am also working to make sure that veterans and their families get the support they need and have earned, including improved health care services.

[Fighting Back Cuts to the National Guard and Reserve](#)

[Oregon National Guard Deployment to Afghanistan in 2014](#)

[Oregon Soldiers Case Win Case Against KBR](#)

[Rogue Ales & Spirits' Tribute to the Troops](#)

[Funding for Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder and Traumatic Brain Injury](#)

[Challenges for Returning Veterans](#)

[How I Can Help You](#)

## **NEWS FOR OREGON'S NATIONAL GUARD**

### **Fighting Back Cuts to the National Guard and Reserve:**

In the past 22 years, the Oregon National Guard has deployed over 9,000 citizen-soldiers in support of every major combat operation in which the United States has been involved. Oregonians have flown the flag of the United States in combat in Kuwait, Bosnia, Iraq, and Afghanistan, and also responded to disasters whenever Mother Nature had off days. The citizen-soldiers of the Oregon Guard do great credit to the people of the state and to the nation as a whole. I support every effort to maintain the investments we've made in the National Guard over the last decade so that it remains a fully-funded, agile and operational force.

As we move to responsibly reduce our defense spending, it only makes sense to continue to build and rely on our Guard and Reserve as an integrated and operational force. Guard units can cost as little as a quarter to a third as much as their full time, active duty counterparts. The Air Guard performs half of all Air Force missions, but uses only 14 percent of personnel funds. Rather than undermining these investments in the hunt for savings, we must ensure that the

Pentagon takes advantage of the savings inherent in the Guard.

That's why I was troubled to see the 11<sup>th</sup> Quadrennial Review of Military Compensation, which proposed to cut drill pay in half for National Guardsmen and women. Not only was the proposal simplistic, it was illogical. When factoring in down weekends, annual leave, holidays and off-duty time, per-day compensation is higher than that of an Oregon Guard. It was a no-brainer for the Oregon Congressional delegation to mobilize and send a letter to the Pentagon in July, outlining why cutting drill pay by half for the Oregon Guard would not only be unreasonable, but irresponsible. Such a rapid response has sidelined the proposal.

When the Air Force tried to find savings for their 2013 budget by cutting 5,100 airmen and 39 aircraft from the Air Guard, the Oregon delegation again mobilized, pushed back, and stopped this unbalanced approach.

### **Oregon National Guard Deployment to Afghanistan in 2014:**

In September, the Army notified the Oregon Army National Guard's 41<sup>st</sup> Infantry Brigade Combat Team to begin preparing for deployment to Afghanistan in 2014. If the 41<sup>st</sup>

Infantry Brigade Combat Team sends 1,800 troops overseas, it would be the Oregon National Guard's second-largest movement of soldiers since WWII. With President Obama's plan to withdraw all remaining U.S. and NATO combat troops by the end of 2014, the 41<sup>st</sup>

Infantry Brigade could be among the last U.S. troops in the country. The danger associated with this kind of mission is very real. The fact that the Oregon National Guard was selected for this important mission speaks volumes about their professionalism, commitment, and skill. I stand ready to assist the Oregon Army National Guard and their families as they prepare to undertake this monumental task.

### **Verdict Reached in Oregon Soldiers Case against KBR:**

I have continued to closely monitor the case of Oregon National Guardsmen who were exposed to hexavalent chromium, and have fought to ensure that this never happens again. I worked to successfully pass an amendment to the National Defense Authorization Act that requires the

Secretary of Defense to notify the Congressional defense committees when the Pentagon enters into indemnification agreements with contractors connected to U.S. military efforts abroad, and explain why such provisions are necessary.

While progress has been made for future generations of soldiers, those Guardsmen affected previously continue to fight for the benefits and compensation they deserve. KBR, the massive defense contracting firm with a spotty history of quality control, knowingly exposed Oregon National Guardsmen to the deadly carcinogen hexavalent chromium while the soldiers were deployed in southern Iraq in 2003.

Fortunately, the case against KBR was brought to trial, and a positive verdict has been reached. KBR was found negligent in their operations, and was ordered to pay \$85 million in compensation to the dozen Oregon Army National Guard soldiers it harmed. Each soldier was awarded a total of \$7.1 million in damages.

This is an important milestone. I've met with these brave soldiers and hearing their ordeal made me heartsick. They have clearly been damaged as a result of their service and negligence on the part of the contractor.

It is critical that those who have been abused receive all the help possible in trying to get their lives back in order and further protect their health. However, this ruling is not just about helping those who have suffered, but also sends a strong message of accountability. Much of the support for our men and women in Iraq and Afghanistan relies on private-sector contractors. It is therefore absolutely essential that support services like those managed by KBR be provided at the highest quality possible. Those who put their lives on the line in service of this country deserve no less.

### **Rogue Ales & Spirits' Tribute to the Troops:**

In September, I attended the Rogue Ales & Spirits' tribute to the troops, a special event in honor

of active duty military members, veterans, and their families at the Rogue Distillery and Public House in Northwest Portland. Over the last decade, Rogue has designed over a dozen custom beer labels in honor of deployed Oregon National Guard units. Too often, our veterans and service men and women in Oregon don't receive the public attention and adoration they so rightfully deserve. We lack the large military installations and their associated tight-knit residential communities that are so important in supporting military families. Rogue Ales & Spirits' tribute to the troops is an excellent example of how local groups and small businesses can raise awareness of the immense sacrifices so many Oregonians have made. At this year's event, Rogue introduced a new custom beer label commemorating the 10 years of deployments the Oregon National Guard has endured.

## CHALLENGES FOR RETURNING VETERANS

2012 will go down in history as the first year in military history that suicides in the Army outpaced deaths due to combat operations. Across all branches of the military, service members are taking their own lives at the rate of about one per day – a heartbreaking and unacceptable statistic. I am pleased that the military, the Department of Veterans Affairs, and national and local support networks are taking steps to address this issue and offer hope where it is needed most, but more needs to be done.

To survive combat, only to return home and end one's life, is so very tragic. We must fight here at home to ensure our veterans get the help they need – and most importantly – get it when they need it.

In an effort to curb the record breaking numbers of suicides in the military this year, the Army held a service-wide stand down for suicide prevention on September 27, 2012. Ordinary duties were suspended as Army leadership conducted suicide prevention training, resilience-building and mentoring courses.

The Department of Defense and the Department of Veteran Affairs (VA) launched a joint campaign for suicide awareness, and the White House announced a new Executive Order to improve access to mental health services for veterans, service members and military families in response to this glaring problem,. The Executive Order mandates that the VA ensure that any veteran identifying him or herself as being in crisis must be able to connect with a mental health professional or trained mental health worker within 24 hours.

Oregon is unique in the fact that we don't have any major military installations. When our brave men and women come home, they lack the informal support networks that stem from a military community and the built-in support networks provided by bases in many other states. To fill that gap, Oregon has taken the lead by innovating its way to a solution, expanding the nationwide

Yellow Ribbon Reintegration Program, which provides critical services to National Guard members and their families. I fought to ensure that it was well funded in this year's Defense Authorization and look forward to strengthening the program in the future.

I have also cosponsored the Embedded Mental Health Providers for Reserves Act, which was added to the Defense Authorization, ensuring our Guard and Reservists have access to mental health professionals during routine training. This additional resource is straightforward and increases early detection and opportunities for treatment in Oregon, where care for our service members can be comparatively limited.

A short list of the challenges our Veterans face when they return:

- The VA has a backlog of more than 900,000 unresolved benefit claims. Each claim takes an average of 240 days to complete, versus the VA's goal of 80 days;
- veterans who live in rural parts of Oregon must travel long distances to get the care they deserve with few transportation options;
- even as the economy steadily improves, our veterans continue to struggle to find career opportunities, a significant challenge;
- many female veterans do not receive the quality, gender-specific health care they deserve;
- we continue to lack accountability and sufficient progress in prevention and treatment of Military Sexual Trauma for both women and men;
- there remains a significant gap between the promise of higher education through the GI Bill and actually receiving a quality, accredited degree that will translate into employment;
- we must continue to fight back efforts to undercut the significant investment we've made in our National Guard and Reserve over the last decade, and instead ensure that we shift towards a robust operational reserve; and,
- we must overcome perhaps the most persistent challenge that awaits our men and women in uniform, which is the transition from Soldier, Sailor, Airman, Marine, and Coast Guardsman to Citizen.

## HOW I CAN HELP YOU

My Portland office has staff members trained to assist veterans with a variety of issues.

**Assistance is available to veterans in distress or at risk of suicide.**

The Department of Veterans Affairs operates the Veterans Crisis Line to assist servicepeople and veterans in times of psychological distress. All interactions with the Crisis Line are totally confidential. To reach the Crisis Line:

- Call **1-800 273- TALK (8255)**
- Send a text to **838255**
- Or visit **veteranscrisisline.net** for confidential chat.

Over the years, my staff has successfully eliminated roadblocks to claims, found lost DD214s, uncovered answers to long-standing problems, and assisted veterans in getting copies of their military records or service medals. If you need assistance, please contact my Portland office at 729 NE Oregon Street, Suite 115, Portland, Oregon 97232, or call 503-231-2300.

### Important Links for Veterans and Active Duty Military Members in Oregon

- Oregon National Guard Reintegration Team: <http://www.orng-vet.org> - a comprehensive site for all veterans and military in Oregon
- For information on both the Montgomery and Post-9/11 GI Bills: <http://www.gibill.va.gov>
- U.S. Department of Veterans' Affairs: <http://www.va.gov> – or call 1-800-827-1000
- Portland VA Medical Center Patient Advocate's Office: Call 503-273-5319

### For help in filing a benefit claim with the VA:

- State, County and National Veteran Service Officers: <http://www.oregon.gov/odva/VSODIRECT/pages/locator.aspx>